

Merry and Bright by the zesty lemon

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Humor

Language: English

Characters: Dustin H., Eleven/Jane H., Mike W., Steve H.

Pairings: Eleven/Jane H./Mike W.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-12-16 20:14:14

Updated: 2019-12-16 20:14:14

Packaged: 2019-12-17 14:32:03

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 8,783

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Steve agrees to chaperone the junior high dance, and has some long overdue conversations. Some Christmas fluff served with a surprise visitor and a side of feels.

Merry and Bright

A/N: Please consider reading the other parts to this story: 1) Accidental Code Red, 2) A Different Kind of Code Red, 3) Beach Day and 4) You Can't Choose Family as there will be some reference and otherwise might be a little confusing :) I hope you enjoy!

"Christmas is the *best*." Dustin explained excitedly, mouth moving a mile a minute even as he stuffed popcorn into his mouth.

"Really?" Eleven asked, eyes wide and captivated. She was sitting on the floor of Dustin's living room, leaning against the couch where Max was currently sprawled, face down in the cushions.

Lucas sat in one of the two recliners, rocking almost absentmindedly while Dustin claimed the loveseat. Lucas, Eleven, Max and Dustin been doing some of their homework at Dustin's house. His mom was running errands, leaving plenty of snacks for them while she was out. They were only missing Mike and Will to make the complete set.

Mike had been tricked into a "father-son bonding outing" as Karen Wheeler so helpfully put it. Mr. Wheeler was dragging Mike to a hockey game in a misguided attempt at bonding.

Will meanwhile, was helping his mom clean the house in preparation for Jonathan's arrival next week. Both Byers were excited to see Jonathan, who'd been away at NYU this year for the first time. This left Eleven, Max, Lucas and Dustin to do their studying together. So far, they'd made it two-thirds of the way through, before the topic of Christmas came up.

"There's snow and presents and lots of cookies."

"Cookies?" Eleven repeated, her interest piqued.

Dustin nodded sagely.

"And Santa comes! Well, Santa isn't real or anything, it's statistically impossible, but my mom still puts a present under the tree from him."

"Santa?"

"Yeah! He's this jolly old guy who wears a red suit and enters your home by coming down the chimney and leaves presents for kids."

Dustin didn't notice how Eleven looked increasingly alarmed.

"Bad?" Eleven looked nervously at the Henderson's fireplace as though some chubby old guy wearing a dirty red suit was going to burst into the living room at any moment.

"What? No! Santa is a good guy."

"But he breaks into your house at night... from the chimney?"

"When you put it that way it sounds creepy," Dustin said, face scrunched up in thought.

"You're screwing this up," Lucas interjected, exasperated. He practically shoved Dustin aside. "Christmas isn't just about getting presents and stuff."

"Hey! I was getting to that." Dustin squawked indignantly.

Lucas rolled his eyes and ignored him. "It's about doing stuff with your family. Like... every year, my dad takes us out to a Christmas tree lot and we pick out a tree together. And when we get home, my mom makes us real hot chocolate with marshmallows."

Eleven perked up at that. "What do you do?" She directed her question to Dustin next, who looked all too happy to answer.

"My mom always cooks a big dinner on Christmas Eve. Then we sit around the fireplace and each open one present before we watch a cheesy Christmas movie. Even Mews gets a present. I guess it will be Tews this year." A guilty look crossed over his features, he looked towards the little 'Mews shrine' as they'd dubbed it on the mantle. It was just a photo collage of Mews with his mom, him, and some solo shots surrounded by a few candles.

"Every year?" Eleven asked.

Dustin nodded, "yeah, it's tradition."

"Tradition." Eleven nodded her head sagely, this was a word she'd learned before from Hop.

They were only two weeks out from Christmas now, but the spirit of the Christmas season was full steam ahead in Hawkins. Everywhere, decorations were hung and even the school was decked out in paper snowflakes and lights.

"Max?" Eleven asked, prompting a groan from the girl lying face down on the couch. She'd fallen there at some point during small homework session and had yet to get up, content to lay there with her face hidden in the plethora of throw pillows Dustin's mom decorated with. Tews had settled on her back, also content to sit there, purring loudly.

"Worst family dinner ever. Then I just go to my room." Max said, her voice muffled into the pillows.

Eleven frowned as Dustin and Lucas shared a sympathetic look.

Max propped her head up on her chin, the skin of her cheeks creased from the fabric of the pillow. "It's not all bad. My mom lets me lick the spoon when she makes her cherry pie for Christmas dinner. But dinner with Billy and Neil is... fun. But the best part of Christmas," Max whispered conspiratorially, "is no school for *two* whole weeks."

Lucas and Dustin nodded in awe-like agreement.

Eleven smothered a giggle.

For the first time ever, Eleven was about to experience a "true" Christmas. Now that she'd been attending Hawkins Junior High with the rest of the Party since September, she was free to attend the school dance that always preceded the winter break.

Gone were the juvenile days of 'the Snowball' and instead Junior High brought the introduction of the Winter Formal. Eleven was so excited for the dance, she could barely focus on anything else, and that was before the introduction to what Christmas was actually all about.

Though the rest of the party wasn't nearly as excited to attend the dance as Eleven was (although they suspected Max was more excited than she was actually letting on), they certainly weren't going to burst her bubble.

"Did your boy toy ask you to the dance yet?" Dustin asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Eleven laughed. "No. I asked him."

"Ooooh." Lucas, Dustin and Max said simultaneously.

Mike hadn't told them that. It would make for good teasing fodder later that El had managed to ask Mike before he grew a pair. Not that he had anything to worry about for crying out loud. The way those two looked at each other was so sweet it was almost sickening.

"Did you ask *your* boy toy to the dance yet, Max?" Eleven asked, trying to mimic Dustin's eyebrow waggle, but not quite getting it just yet.

Max snorted, ignoring Lucas's indignant scoff at being referred to as a boy toy (that term was reserved for Mike *only*, thank you very much).

"Hey Lucas, wanna go to the dance together?" Max called, not even looking at him.

"Yep." Lucas agreed, not missing a beat, though his cheeks certainly looked pinker than before.

"There," Max grinned at Eleven, "see, super romantic."

"Dustin?" Eleven asked next.

Dustin shrugged, smirking. "I'm thinking of flying solo. Going stag so I don't have to tie myself down to any of the ladies."

Lucas snorted. Max disguised a laugh by turning it into a cough.

Eleven nodded, though she didn't appear to fully understand what he meant by "going stag", but they moved on.

"We'll need a ride to the dance. Man, I don't want my mom to drop me off again—we're in junior high now." Lucas whined.

"I can't wait to get my license." Max agreed. "Do you think Billy will let me drive his precious Camaro?" She snorted bitterly.

"Who else could we ask?" Dustin asked out loud.

There was a long moment of deep thought.

Finally, Max smirked. "I know *just* who to ask."

.

...

Approximately three miles away, at the Hawkins Police Station, Steve Harrington sneezed.

"Wow, was that a kitten sneezing or what?" Callaghan guffawed, looking to Powell to give him a high five.

Powell just shook his head and left him hanging, a long suffering look on his face.

"Good one Cal." Steve rolled his eyes. He tried to ignore thinking about the weird, old adage that "someone, somewhere was talking about him" because with his goddamn luck it would be true...or was that his ears burning? He couldn't remember.

"Harrington, got a sec?" Hopper's voice cut through the station, making Steve jump a little. He poked his head out from his office. He looked a little pale today, but things were always nuts no matter what job you had around Christmas. This time of the year everyone seemed to go off their rocker.

"Er, yeah Chief." Steve agreed, scrambling up from his chair.

He could hear Cal snickering behind him, but ignored the idiot and headed in to the Chief's office. The smell of cigarettes burned into his nostrils, the Chief had been smoking non-stop lately, seemingly determined to subsist only on cigarettes and coffee as dark as the

Upside down (much to Flo's annoyance).

Hopper got right to it.

"Melvald's just called. Theft this morning, nothing too big, but they damaged a display on their way out. Go take their statements and report back to me later." Hopper sighed, handing Steve the hastily scrawled note.

"Will do." Steve glanced over the written note, noting the time of call, but it was a small little note scrawled in the corner that caught his eye. It read: *J likes Beloye Vino*. Next to it were the words: *pick up some flowers?*

"Do you need this note here, Hop? Seems important." Steve asked, grinning. It was no secret who 'J' was. Joyce and Hopper clearly had unresolved sexual tension to work through, but they were being infuriatingly slow about it.

It didn't take Hopper long to catch on to what he meant.

"Give me that." He growled, snatching the paper back with much more force than necessary while narrowing his eyes at Steve, who didn't breathe a word. He ripped the little note off the corner and tucked it into his chest pocket, subconsciously giving it a little pat once it was there.

"Quit wasting daylight Harrington, get a move on."

"Sir." Steve nodded, unable to keep the grin off his face.

Hopper just waved him away impatiently, though Steve could tell he was flustered.

There was a thin layer of snow on the cruiser when he got outside. He brushed it off quickly with his bare hands enough to see out the windows before he hopped in and started the vehicle. It gave a shrill whine, like it didn't really want to move on such a cold day, but luckily it started up without any other protests.

The drive to Melvald's was short, and only a few minutes later Steve was stepping into the chaotic looking scene in the general store.

"Watch your step, Steve." Joyce Byers called sharply from his left just as he walked in the doorway. He looked down to see the scattered glass and it became pretty apparent what had happened.

"Grab and run?" Steve asked, stepping broadly to get around the spray of glass.

Joyce sighed and nodded; broom clutched in hand. "Knocked the display counter over on their way out."

He nodded and surveyed the damage. It wasn't too bad, luckily the items in the display case seemed largely unbroken, but the display case would cost a pretty penny to replace, that was for sure. Most importantly, no one had been hurt.

He asked a few more questions, jotting down Joyce's statement before concluding that none of the other employees saw the theft so much as they heard it from the back when the display came crashing down.

"While you're here Steve," Joyce began, leaning against the counter, "I was wondering if you would volunteer for the Junior High dance?"

Steve must have looked as surprised as he felt, because Joyce laughed.

"You don't have to sweetie, but if you're available, I'm sure they would appreciate your help. They're shorthanded but I'm already working that night, so I can't lend a hand." She said with a kind smile, the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes crinkling.

Steve nodded. He'd never really thought about volunteering for the junior high dance, but it was just a few hours. Just as he opened his mouth to say "okay, why not", they were interrupted by the shrill ring of the phone.

Joyce gave him an apologetic smile before answering the phone.

"Melvald's, Joyce speaking."

Steve glanced around the shop, waiting until Joyce was done on the phone.

"One moment." Joyce looked amused, covering the mouthpiece of the phone. Steve expected her to excuse herself to go grab a co-worker, or even page someone, but instead, she held the phone out to Steve. "It's for you."

"Me?"

She nodded.

He accepted the phone, puzzled and brought it up to his ear.

"Uh, hello?"

"Hi Steve."

He instantly recognized that voice.

"El?" He said it like a question, because really, what was Eleven doing phoning him at Melvald's?

"I have a question-" there was the unmistakable background sounds of hushed whispers before she continued, *"I mean, a favour to ask."*

Steve blinked. He might have said "oh yeah?" But internally he was as confused as hell.

"Could you drive us to the dance on Friday?" It came out as a rush and it took a moment for Steve to decipher what Eleven was trying to ask. There again, was the unmistakable sound of whispering before she added, *"umm, pretty please?"*

There was no mistaking who Eleven meant by *us*.

Steve should have been expecting this. He'd driven Dustin to the Snowball last year, which he didn't mind at all, so of course the shit would keep him in mind as a chauffeur for this year too.

It didn't take him long to decide. He could hear the earnest excitement in Eleven's voice, and Hopper had mentioned several times how excited she was to attend another dance. She'd had a hard first semester at school, adapting to the overwhelming environment, but she'd done a pretty good job. Hopper was one proud dad, and

Steve didn't want to puncture that excitement in any way.

"Yeah, sure. I'll drive you guys."

Eleven let out a breath. "*Thanks.*"

"No problem, kid. Hey, do me a favour and put Dustin on?"

There was a shuffling sound before Dustin's voice came through: "*Hey buddy, what's up?*"

"Cut the bullshit and quit playing dirty, Henderson." Steve growled into the phone, a complete one-eighty from his gentle demeanor with Eleven.

"*What do you mean?*" He could hear the bullshit seeping through Dustin's voice like a bucket of water with a hole in the bottom of it.

"You know no one can say no to her."

Dustin snickered over the other end of the line. "*I know.*"

"Whatever shithead. Just be ready when I come to pick you up."

"*Yes sir.*" Dustin said mockingly, but without malice. Steve could just picture him mock-saluting on the other end of the line.

With that, Steve hung up, grumbling under his breath. It took him a moment to realize he still had an audience, Joyce was watching him, trying to hide a smile behind her hand at the scene that just played out in front of her.

"I'll do it. I'll volunteer for the dance. Apparently, I'm going to be driving there and back anyways. Might as well save myself some time." Steve joked.

"Great." Joyce smiled. "I'll let the school know. I'm sure they'll give you the details later."

Steve finished taking any notes and headed back to the station, thinking how far King Steve had fallen to have agreed to not only *chaperone a junior high dance*, but to drive a car load of preteens to

said dance.

Somehow, the thought made him smile.

.

...

"You? *You're* volunteering?" Mike asked, surprise written across his face.

It was later that week, the dance just one day away and the excitement was palpable. If he thought the kids were normally hyper, that was nothing compared to the excitement of the upcoming Christmas break paired with the excitement of a dance.

Wheeler was at the station to pick up El, waiting for her both patiently and impatiently as she finished her homework in Hopper's office before, she was allowed to head out. Steve wasn't sure why all these goddamn kids seemed so content to bother him at work, but Wheeler had settled in the chair right in front of his desk and didn't seem to be moving any time soon.

Steve nodded. "Yep. I've got to keep an eye on you shits and make sure you don't get too out of hand."

Mike rolled his eyes, "that's what Nancy said. She's volunteering too."

Steve froze almost imperceptibly at Nancy's name.

He hadn't seen Nancy or Jonathan Byers since that incident so many months ago when Dustin accidentally called a code red, summoning them both back from New York in a flurry of panic. It wasn't that things were awkward with Nancy. Things ended on a fairly positive note considering they were teenagers, but there would always be a soft spot in his heart for her.

Luckily Wheeler didn't seem to notice his frozen response, he was too busy staring hopefully at the office.

A little desperate for a change in topic, Steve asked, "so I hear El asked you to the dance."

Mike's cheeks pinkened, his head whipped around, eyes narrowed. "I was *going* to ask her." The defensive way he said it, it was clear he'd had this conversation before. Honestly, this kid was far too easy to rile up. No wonder Dustin and Lucas liked to poke the bear.

Steve held up his hands in surrender, grinning. "No judgement here, Wheeler."

Mike eyed him suspiciously for a moment before the defensive set to his shoulders deflated. He looked back at Eleven for a moment before looking at his shoes.

"I just..." He trailed off, seeming to think better of what he'd been going to say and reconsidering. "Never mind, it's stupid." He mumbled instead.

Steve frowned and looked at Mike. While he and Mike weren't particularly the closest, he had grown to like the little shit much like the others. The group of preteens were like a fungus, they couldn't help but grow on you. Maybe he and Mike hadn't had nearly as much bonding time, but that didn't mean Steve didn't care any less about him.

"Wheeler. Talk to me." Steve prompted.

Callaghan was in the break room and Powell was following up some kind of case at the city hall, so they at least had a little privacy.

Mike looked at Steve like he was honestly surprised he would want to hear what was on his mind. Something twinged in Steve's gut at the thought.

"Promise not to laugh?" Mike asked.

"Cross my heart."

"I wasn't sure El would want to go with me."

Steve snorted. "You're shitting me." Of all the things he thought Wheeler might say, *that* wasn't it.

Hurt lashed across Mike's face like an open book. Steve immediately

realized the kid had been serious.

"Forget about it." He snapped, going to get up.

"Hold up," Steve stopped him, mind racing a mile a minute. Jesus, he felt like biggest asshole. The *one* thing Wheeler asked him not to do? Of course, he did it. "Sorry Wheeler. Have you seen the way El looks at you?"

Mike hesitated halfway between sitting and leaving, unsure.

"What made you think she wouldn't want to go to the dance with you?" Steve prompted.

Slowly, Mike sank back down into the chair in front of Steve's desk, a hint of uncertainty lingered on his features. He seemed to come to a decision, because the next moment it came pouring out.

"Ever since she started school... El doesn't realize how popular she is. How popular she could be. And then what if she wanted to go with someone better?" Mike took a deep breath, it was clear he must have been thinking about this for a long time, bottling it up.

Steve got it now.

He knew Mike had struggled with watching Eleven's world grow to include more than just him and the Party, but it was the natural course. She had so much to learn, so much time to make up for and starting school with other kids her age was just the next step. Steve had been pretty well versed in the whole high school hierarchy thing and hell, he still cringed when he thought about what a fucking asshole he'd been for a large portion of his life.

Eleven was a popular addition to Hawkins High by virtue of being the new kid alone. Like a hot commodity, people were curious and wanted to get a piece of her. In addition, Eleven was charming, whether she knew it or not, and she'd made some friends outside of the Party, though they were nowhere near as close. Of course, interest in Eleven wouldn't remain just purely platonic.

The part that baffled Steve was that how could Mike think that Eleven could look at anyone else the way she looked at him? Did he

not see it? High school love was fickle and fleeting, but what these kids had in both friendship and in their romantic relationship... it was something else. Something deeper.

"Give yourself a little credit, Wheeler." Steve finally snapped.

Mike looked at him, wide eyed, astonishment broadcasted all over his face. "What?"

"Didn't you call Eleven on the walkie talkie for like three hundred days or something?" He asked pointedly.

"Three hundred and fifty-three." Mike corrected automatically, before flushing.

"Do you think El's the type of person to drop her friends just because some guy flexes his muscles or something?"

"What? No!"

"You like her, right?" Steve smirked.

"Y-yeah, of course." He spluttered, turning an impressive shade of pink.

"Then you should tell her how much you like her."

"Like who?" The innocent, unexpected question made them both jump. Steve and Mike's heads snapped around to see Eleven, standing shyly not so far away. Mike's face slowly went a shade of pink Steve didn't know existed.

"Like... um, look at the time?" Mike stammered out, in a totally unsmooth, unconvincing way.

Good save, Wheeler. Steve internally rolled his eyes.

"All done your homework?" Steve asked, stepping in to take some of the heat off of Mike because he was feeling particularly benevolent today.

Eleven nodded, though she still shot Mike a curious look.

"English sucks." She said simply.

Steve nodded. "I hear that."

"Are you, um... ready to go?" Mike stuttered, lurching up from the seat awkwardly.

Steve silently vowed that Mike could never play poker. He had no poker face game at all.

"Yes." Eleven agreed, her dark eyes still curious, fitting back and forth between the two of them.

Hopper poked his head out of the doorway of his office. "I'll pick you up at nine *sharp*, got it kid?"

"Got it." Eleven agreed, before turning once more to Mike.

"Bye Steve." She said, grabbing Mike's arm and excitedly pulling him towards the door.

Steve waved, ignoring the panicked look on Mike's features. Wheeler would figure it out. He just needed to do the most terrifying thing known known to any man or woman: open up.

Kid would be fine.

Steve, meanwhile, needed to buckle down and get back to work. Now he knew how the chief felt: this goddamn paperwork would be the death of him.

.

...

On Friday at precisely eight o' clock PM with a punctuality even he was proud to achieve, Steve pulled up in front of Max's house.

The Mayfield's house looked weirdly lopsided without Billy's Camaro parked out front. He must have been out doing whatever he did on the weekends, likely getting shitfaced at a party somewhere.

Max and Eleven spilled out onto the doorstep only moments after he pulled up. Max snagged the handle of the back door, her and Eleven giggling as they slid into the back.

"Hi Steve." The two girls greeted happily. Eleven and Max looked nice, hair done, and eyes made up. Steve didn't have a hot clue about preteen girl fashion, but he knew Lucas and Mike wouldn't know what hit them.

"Not taking the front?" He tilted his head towards the front seat, smirking.

Max rolled her eyes. "We'd have to listen to Dustin bitch and moan about it all the way to the dance if we do, so no thanks."

Steve snorted. Max was right. Dustin claiming the front seat of his car was practically sacred. According to Dustin, his name was written on the seat (if the shithead actually scratched his name into the leather, Steve had yet to find it, but if Dustin did, he would *murder* him).

The drive to the Wheelers' residence where the remaining members of the Party were getting ready was short. When Steve pulled up and honked the horn, it took a minute for the boys to pile out the front door.

They looked much more put together than usual, looking uncomfortable in their nice suits in the way that only teenage boys could look disgruntled when they were forced to dress nice.

"We barely escaped Mrs. Wheeler." Dustin burst out as soon as he opened the front car door. "She wouldn't stop taking photos."

Mike looked particularly disgruntled until he caught sight of Eleven in the back seat. His expression quickly changed from "might be constipated" to Mike-heart-eyes-Wheeler in a flash.

Dustin slid into his customary position in the front seat, while Will, Lucas, Mike, Max and El somehow crammed into the back. Max was half sitting on Lucas's lap, while poor Will was squished up against the window. It was getting harder and harder to fit them all into his car at the rate they were growing.

The car quickly became loud and obnoxious and full of energy with the whole Party. Dustin was talking to Steve a mile a minute while Lucas and Will and Max argued about some movie they'd been watching.

By the time they pulled up in front of the high school gymnasium, Steve was so ready to not be packed into a little car with six too-excited preteens.

"Thanks for the ride, Harrington." Lucas clapped him on the shoulder happily once they pulled up at the high school. The others chimed in with something similar.

"Yeah, yeah no problem. Be ready to go home for twelve. Got it?" He waited until every one of them gave him an affirmative before he nodded and got out of the vehicle.

Mike, El, Lucas, Max, Will and Dustin all piled out of the car behind him, laughing and talking over each other excitedly as they followed Steve towards the high school gymnasium.

As soon as Steve entered the gym, he stalled for just a moment, not expecting the strange wave of *something* to wash over him when he stepped back into the gym. It was like an inexplicable displacement. At a time, he belonged here, hell, he'd owned this school, there were a lot of memories in this building, good and bad. But he didn't belong here anymore.

"Watch it." Dustin complained, having bumped into Steve when he stopped suddenly.

"Mr. Harrington." A voice called out authoritatively, startling him and the rest of the Party.

Steve recognized that voice anywhere. You only got yelled at a certain number of times before it was forever ingrained into your memory.

"Er, we'll catch up with you later Steve!" Will said, before the rest of the group scrambled.

Visions of former detentions and his numerous trips to the office

flashed before Steve's eyes as he turned around to face his former principal: Mrs. Benson.

"Hi Mrs. Benson." Steve turned to greet Principal Benson awkwardly.

She looked him over with her hawk like gaze before she seemed to soften just a little. "Thanks for volunteering. Can you keep an eye on the punch table tonight?"

"Sure." Steve nodded. There were already quite a few teens scattered about the gym, but he managed to locate the punch table. In the many years of Hawkins High dances, the setup never seemed to change, leaving the punch table in the same place it always was.

He took up his post beside Mr. Clarke, who greeted him happily and began to chat his ear off.

Before Steve knew it, it was ten and already the gym was packed with hordes of preteens and teenagers milling around, dancing and laughing. Although no one's been able to mess with the punch with Steve and Mr. "Steve, we're both adults now, call me Scott" Clarke standing guard, that didn't stop the teens from sneaking it in, or partaking beforehand if the number of flushed faces was anything to go by.

Steve was busy simultaneously keeping an eye on the punch bowl and keeping an eye on the Party when another voice startled him.

"Hey." It's gentle and yet firm at the same time, making a shiver of recognition curl down his spine.

Nancy Wheeler was just as beautiful as always. She wore a deep green dress with a bow on her left hip, the fabric swaying around her calves as she moved. Her hair was always one of Steve's favourite features, so wild and curly and perfect for tangling his fingers into. It was pulled half up tonight, a few tendrils escaping to frame her delicate face.

"Hey." He said clumsily, realizing he'd been staring a few moments too long.

"Punch bowl duty?"

"What?"

Nancy smiled and gestured to the table behind him.

"Oh—yeah. You too?"

Nancy shook her head. "Floater."

They lapsed into a short silence, though it wasn't uncomfortable. She seemed to be drinking in the dance, her gaze lingering on the photography station where Jonathan was already busy at work.

"How's New York?" Steve blurted.

Nancy didn't seem to mind. "New York is great." She said simply, not missing a beat, "I think you'd really like it there."

That Nancy had thought of him at all made him feel strangely warm inside.

"How are you doing here?" She asked.

Steve nodded. "Good. Hawkins is pretty much the same as when you left. Now I just fill out a lot more paperwork than I ever did before."

Nancy's eyes crinkled at the corners, she looked at him thoughtfully. "I never thought you'd become a police officer. It suits you." She said, not unkindly.

"Thanks Nance." Somehow hearing Nancy say that, meant a lot to Steve. He wasn't sure why, but it did.

They lapsed back into silence, and she sighed and glanced around. "I guess I'd better go do another lap."

He didn't want her to leave just yet. There were a few other teachers lingering by the table, it would be okay if he left for a few minutes.

"Want to dance?" The words left Steve's mouth before he could even process what he'd just done.

Nancy blinked in surprise, but then her lips curled into a tentative

smile. "Sure."

It was hard to tell who was more surprised in the moment that she agreed.

In seemingly perfect timing, a slow song was cued up just as they went to the head to the dance floor. It wasn't something they had really gotten around to doing before, but his hands feel easily to her waist, her arms encircling his neck with just as much ease.

For a moment they swayed together, comfortable in silence. He couldn't help but scan the dance floor, looking for the shitheads out of reflex. He could see the cluster, mostly helped by Max's bright red head and Dustin's outrageously curly locks up on the bleachers. They were laughing and red-faced, clearly taking a break from the dance floor. He watched Dustin accidentally snort coke out his nose when Will said something to him, eliciting a mixture of responses from the rest of the party.

"It looks good on you, Steve." Nancy said a moment later, drawing his attention back down to her.

"What does?"

The corners of her petal pink lips quirked upwards, clearly following his gaze to see where he'd been staring. "Motherhood."

She laughed at his stunned expression, before finally Steve recovered.

"Ha-ha." He said, lacking any true venom.

"You really care for them."

There was a time when this might have embarrassed the crap out of Steve to answer this question, but he was past that.

"Yeah."

The song finished a minute later, and Nancy and Steve released one another slowly, heading back towards their volunteer station.

"It was good to see you." Nancy said, her bluebell gaze sparkling with

sincerity.

"You too, Nance." He meant it.

The rest of the dance wasn't too exciting. Some punk tried to spike the punch, but Mr. Clarke quickly realized what had happened and was quick to catch the culprit.

By midnight, everything was winding down.

Steve wasn't here for setup, so he decided to stay to help and take down once Nancy quickly volunteered to drive the kids home and then swing back around for Jonathan.

That was how Steve was left alone to pick up tables with Jonathan Byers.

All night Byers had been busy at the photo station, taking adorably awkward photos of the teens and their dates to be forever immortalized, so they hadn't run into each other yet.

He wasn't really sure what to say to him, but Jonathan didn't seem to have that issue.

"Hey man." Jonathan greeted in that quiet, earnest tone of his.

Surprised again for the second time that evening, Steve recovered enough to say "hey".

That was something about Jonathan Byers. He was quiet, and seemingly awkward, but when he spoke, you listened to what he had to say. It was something to learn, how Jonathan both spoke to and listened to people. His full attention was always given, never divided. It made you feel important. Mostly gone was the uncertain, slouched figure from high school. He walked with much more confidence, and there was a quiet grace now to his movements that hadn't been there before. Nancy had been good for him.

"I've been meaning to talk to you." Jonathan said after a quiet moment as they tidied up the tabletop where the photo booth had been.

Steve stilled, but when Jonathan didn't say anything immediately and kept tidying, he resumed his motions.

"I really appreciate you being around for my mom and Will." Steve paused again, this time stopping to look at Jonathan.

"Mom told me how you help out around the house. And Will told me you'll come spend the night sometimes when mom's working. I can't tell you how much that means to me. I was worried when I went off to school... but I stopped worrying after they told me that."

This was probably the longest sentence Steve had ever heard Jonathan speak, it took him a moment to respond.

Steve swallowed. The holidays were clearly getting to everyone with all these mushy conversations coming up. "You don't have to thank me. Your mom has done so much, and Will's a cool kid."

Jonathan nodded thoughtfully. "Still. Thank you."

Steve decided it was now or never to get something off of his chest. "Look Byers. I'm really sorry about all the... bullshit. I was such a huge asshole." He didn't have to elaborate on what he meant, because really, there were a lot of incidents that Steve was ashamed of. Sure, he'd bought Jonathan a new camera, but he never actually apologized to him. It was long overdue.

"You were." Jonathan agreed and Steve flinched at the bluntness of his words. "But I wasn't the coolest head either. And you were there when it counted." Apparently, that meant a lot in Jonathan Byers' world. He smiled at Steve, and it was like a great weight was lifted off of his shoulders.

"Thanks Byers."

"Anytime, Harrington."

The cleanup didn't take too long between the remaining volunteers. By the time Nancy swung back around from dropping all the kids off, they were done.

Nancy and Jonathan said goodnight before climbing into the

Wheeler's vehicle and heading out.

Steve watched them go, and for the first time, there was no pang in his chest.

.

...

"Steve, are you even listening?"

"Huh?" Steve asked intelligently.

Dustin had met him at the station and asked for a ride home, he'd been looking at things in Melvald's for his mom's Christmas present. Steve's shift had been almost up anyways, and Hopper let him go a little early.

Dustin huffed and rolled his eyes. "As I was *saying*, we couldn't decide who gets to have you at dinner, so we came to a truce."

"What?" Steve was so lost; they might as well call the search off.

"Keep up, Harrington." Dustin sighed, "we couldn't come to an agreement, so we compromised. We're all going to the Byers' for Christmas Eve."

"All?"

"Yeah, the Byers, me and my mom, El and Hop, the whole Wheeler family, Max, Lucas's family. Just be prepared for Lucas's little sister, Erica. She's a nightmare."

Stunned, Steve nearly missed the turn off to the Henderson's house.

"When was this decided?" He asked, overcorrecting and causing Dustin to lurch a little in his seat.

"Last night. We asked Mrs. Byers and all our parents. Everyone is good to go. This will be great." Dustin said excitedly, before it dawned on him. "Wait, you didn't have plans, did you?"

Steve frowned, thinking of his parents with a dull ache in his chest.

"No, I don't." Truthfully, it had been something he'd been trying to avoid thinking about for the last few weeks. This would be the first Christmas without his parents, something that sat heavy in his heart, despite willing it not to.

"Okay, good." Dustin sighed in relief.

Steve smiled at ruffled his hair, which Dustin hated. "I wouldn't miss it for the world anyways, shithead."

Dustin shoved his hand away but looked pleased anyways. "Good."

.

...

There was no other way to put it: Christmas Eve was *amazing*.

There was insane amount of Christmas lights strung up outside and inside, illuminating the Byers' house in a dreamy, soft glow. Will and Jonathan had gone earlier that week to cut down their own Christmas tree, which stood just a little too tall for the living room, the tip of the tree squished up against the ceiling, but it was an impressive sight. The tree was decorated with an assortment of homemade ornaments, probably from the years of Jonathan and Will making them as children. The house looked beautiful.

By the time Steve arrived, Jonathan and Will were in the process of helping wrangle as many chairs as they could for the dining table. Soon after, the Sinclairs (plus Max) arrived and there was a flurry of introductions.

When he met Erica, she sized him up with perhaps the most scrutinizing gaze he'd ever seen. Whether she was okay with him or not, he'd never know. All she said was: "So *you're* Harrington." And that was that.

After the Sinclairs, Dustin and his mom were the next to arrive. Claudia Henderson gave him a big hug and a peck on the cheek. Her bright red lipstick left a smooch mark, but Steve didn't mind.

Next it was the Wheelers, impeccably dressed, Karen carrying a delicious looking dish in hand. Mike quickly scurried off from his parents to join his friends in the living room.

Last to arrive was Eleven and Hopper. Eleven practically yanked Hopper through the doorway she was so impatient to get inside to the Christmas Eve party. Her eyes lit up in wonder as she surveyed the Byers' home, alight with Christmas tree lights and cheer.

She proudly presented Joyce with a slightly mangled looking poinsettia. Joyce accepted it with a kind smile and a twinkle in her eye.

By the time everyone arrived, there were sixteen of them in total. You couldn't hardly walk around the Byers' house without bumping into anyone—not that anyone seemed to mind. Everyone brought something: wine, dessert, sides, you name it.

It was quickly decided that the adults would eat at the table while the kids took the living room.

When Steve realized *his* chair was at the adult's table, his life flashed before his eyes. He could tell Jonathan and Nancy were thinking along the same lines too, as they kept glancing towards the living room like they were still expecting to be banished to the kids' area.

Dinner was wonderful. Steve had gotten better at cooking, thanks to Joyce and Will, but nothing beat a dinner like this where everyone contributed.

At one point, some sneaky bastards (Will and El) put up some mistletoe in the doorway without anyone realizing. It wasn't pointed out until Hopper and Joyce happened to pass through the doorway together and El shouted:

"It's tradition!" While pointing upwards.

Stunned, Hopper simply turned bright red while Joyce chuckled. She gently touched his face before standing on the tips of her toes and planting a tender kiss on the apple of his cheek.

Will and El appeared far too pleased. Clearly Steve wasn't the only

one fed up with the snail's pace Joyce and Hopper were going.

Throughout the night people kept forgetting about the mistletoe and getting caught under it. El and little Holly Wheeler began to take great delight in reminding everyone about the mistletoe.

Lucas and Max were caught.

Then Jonathan and Nancy.

And then from there it devolved into some strange pairings.

Hopper and Mrs. Henderson (Steve wasn't the only one left with a smooch mark on his cheek now), Nancy and Will, Mike and Mrs. Wheeler, Erica and Mr. Sinclair.

Finally, Lucas and Dustin passed under the doorway unthinkingly and Holly excitedly called it out. Horrified, the two boys looked up and realized that they were indeed under the mistletoe together. They began to argue their way out of it, but between the puppy dog eyes from Holly and El, they quickly caved. Lucas and Dustin did 'rock, paper, scissors' which ended with Lucas giving Dustin the quickest and *stingiest* peck on the cheek anyone had ever seen.

(It didn't help that for the entire rest of the party, Erica kept making exaggerated kissy faces at Lucas, much to his displeasure.)

Hopper finally had enough of the mistletoe when El dragged Mike under it for the third time to kiss and took it down less than discreetly.

By the time the party began to wind down, Mr. Wheeler and Holly were passed out in one of the chairs in the Byers' living room, Mr. Wheeler snoring loudly. Even Erica had curled up on one of the couches and was dozing, her head snapping forward every so often before the motion woke her up and the cycle started all over again.

It was well past midnight when Steve finally headed home.

The highway was empty as he cruised down the road, the only inhabitants were the softly falling snowflakes drifting to the bare pavement. It looked like Dustin would get the white Christmas he'd

been wanting after all.

Steve turned off the highway and immediately did a double take.

What the? Did he take a wrong turn?

His lights illuminated a too familiar vehicle sitting in the driveway of what he thought was the turn off to Hopper's trailer.

He got a little closer, his grip on the steering wheel tightened and his heartbeat picked up to a heavy, strange rhythm. A myriad of thoughts stampeded through Steve's mind all at once to justify why his *dad's* hot red sleek BMW was idling in the driveway of Hopper's cabin on Christmas Eve.

The last time Steve had spoken to either of his parents had been disastrous birthday dinner where his father threw him out yet again and his mother stood there and let it happen.

There were no street lights close to Hopper's cabin, only the high beams on his car illuminated the silhouette inside the other vehicle. It was too dark to tell if it was his mom or his dad.

Taking a deep breath, Steve pulled his car up to his usual parking spot and glanced over.

It was his mom.

She watched him pull up and turn his ignition off and for a long moment, they just sat there, staring at each other from the safety of their own vehicles.

All day he'd tried not to think of his parents, which was hard during Christmas. Even though his father was a complete asshole most of the time, Christmas Eve and Christmas day were sacred days in the Harrington household, steeped in tradition.

His mother baked enough cookies to feed the entire US army twice over every year. She always drafted Steve's help putting up the decorations, and although in his teen years he'd pretended to gripe about it, it was a tradition he was secretly loved. His mother would direct him or ask for input on the exact placement of the ornaments

on the tree.

When he was a young boy, Steve's father would even bring him to the department stores in the city closest to Hawkins and let him help pick out his mother's expensive bauble of a present. They'd wrap it together, and you could always tell which one it was because the rest looked as though they were straight from a magazine, while theirs looked like a creature with no opposable thumbs wrapped it.

It wasn't always perfect, but it was the Harrington way.

All day Steve tried to tell himself it didn't matter.

That he didn't miss his parents. That he didn't care.

But Steve did care. *A lot.*

He opened the car door.

Steve didn't watch to see what his mom did, he opened the back door and retrieved the leftovers Joyce had so thoughtfully packed for him and nudged the door shut with his boot.

His mom was still sitting in the car when he came around, but Steve just headed to the front door and unlocked it. He flicked on the porch light and headed into the front room of the trailer, but he left the door open behind him as he headed inside, his heart beating wildly in his chest the entire time.

Flicking on more lights, Steve was heading into the kitchen when he heard the engine noise cut, and then the opening and closing of a car door.

He put the leftovers down on the counter just as his mother stepped inside the trailer tentatively. She left the door open behind her, like she wasn't sure if he was going to toss her out by the scruff of her neck.

She looked like she wanted to say something but was completely unsure where to start.

Steve decided to throw his mom a bone and say the easiest thing.

"Can you close the door? We're letting out all the heat."

His mom jumped like she hadn't been expecting her son to speak to her at all, but quickly turned and did as asked.

"Steve..." She began, but trailed off, still standing in the doorway.

For another moment they just stared at each other from across the room and Steve drank in the sight of her. She looked skinnier than he remembered, and more tired too. He couldn't remember a Christmas Day where his mom wasn't perfectly done up.

"Why are you here mom?"

She fidgeted nervously with the Tupperware container in her hands. Steve hadn't noticed it until now. It was stuffed full of Christmas cookies.

"It wasn't Christmas without you." His mom finally said, her face stricken.

He hadn't been expecting that. Caught off guard, Steve didn't say a word.

What could he say to that? What did *she* want him to say to that? Did she expect him to open his arms wide and let bygones be bygones just because of the good ol' Christmas spirit? Because *that* wasn't happening. Those wounds hadn't scarred over yet, and maybe they never would.

"I came to say.... I'm sorry, Steve and that I'm *trying*." His mom's eyes were screwed shut, like if she closed them hard enough she could fight off any tears. "I need you to know I'm trying. You're a young man now and... you really don't have to have anything to do with your parents anymore, but I don't want that. You're *my* son." She refocused on him, her eyes wide and pleading and tired.

He blinked rapidly, trying to clear away the sharp burn from behind his eyes.

"You just stood there."

They both knew what he meant. The disastrous birthday dinner at their home was so many months ago, but yet still so fresh at the forefront of his mind.

"It was a mistake. Probably the biggest one of my life." His mother's voice caught, "I'm sorry, Steve."

The air whooshed right out of his lungs.

"I don't know if I can forgive you." Steve admitted, finally looking at his mom properly. "I definitely can't forgive dad."

Tears pooled in her eyes, but she took a deep breath. "I know. You take all the time you need. I just... I just need you to know that I'm your mom—and if you ever need anything, I am *here* for you."

Those words.

Those were the words he'd been so longing to hear ever since embarking down the path of becoming a police officer from his parents. All he ever wanted was for them to be proud of him, for his parents to support him.

Those were the words Steve didn't realize how much he *needed* to hear until now.

"Thanks mom." His voice choked, but neither of them cared.

She tentatively held her arms out but didn't force him to come to her. Steve caved almost immediately, returning his mom's hug just as needy as she hugged him.

"I love you, Steve."

"I love you too mom."

It wasn't perfect, and it may never be, but it was a start.

He may never reconcile with his dad, and that was okay. No matter how much Steve had wanted his dad to support him, he couldn't change him either. That part was up to Mr. Harrington. It took two people to repair a relationship.

Just knowing his mom loved him and had his back, it was the best Christmas present he could ever ask for.

...

A/N: I'M NOT CRYING, YOU'RE CRYING!

This has been swirling around in my head for a while now and finally I finished it (just in time for Christmas, woo!) It's also the longest one of this series so far, by approximately 2000 words extra. As much as I love reading the fics where Steve's parents are the absolute WORST, I wanted to try something a little different, they're just half the worst because Steve deserves all the love!

I am also so stoked I finally got in some Mike/Steve bonding time!

I have a few other one shots in the works for this series, but I hope you enjoyed this one. I have been so overwhelmed by the response, it really makes me so happy it's made so many people's days!

If you have a moment, let me know what you thought of this addition.

Have a great day!

PS: beloye vino translates (according to google anyways!) to 'white wine' in Russian